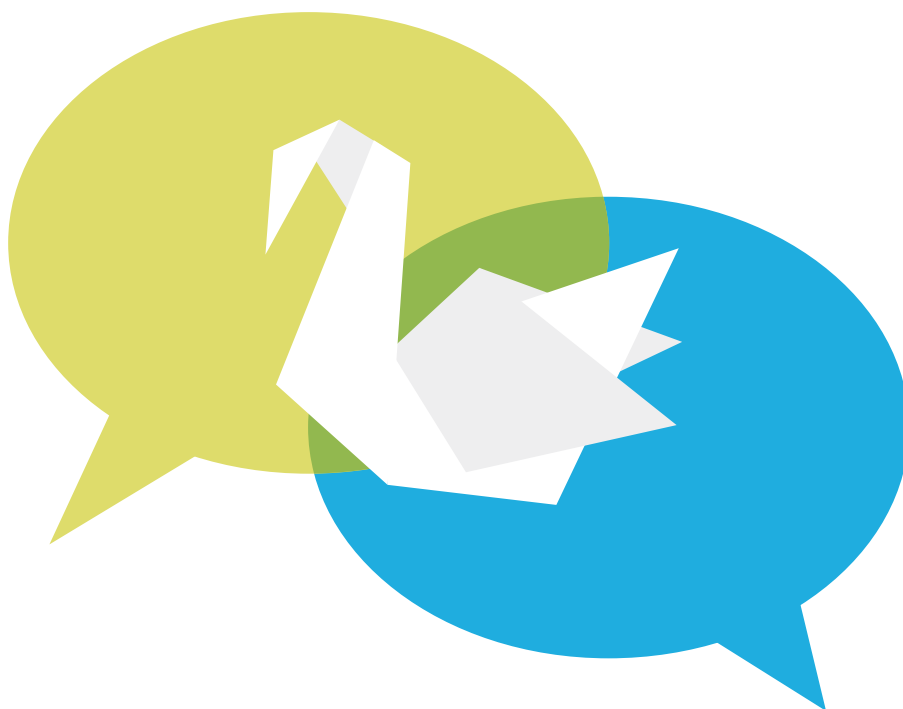


Let the Right Brain In

Put Something in the Middle of Difficult Conversations



Philanthropy's
Reflective Practices:
a project to help you
build what you bring
to your work

Sometimes words need an aide-de-camp to catalyze authentic dialogue. Images, metaphors, stories and poems can encourage a different kind of sensemaking for moments freighted with history, unspoken expectations, or lack of clarity. If a dialogue between you and me is stuck, then talking through a third object, like a poem or image, may help deepen the conversation.

Chuck Palus and his colleague David Horth at the Center for Creative Leadership describe this reflective practice as “reducing anxiety and defensiveness in complex situations by ‘putting something in the middle’ to sustain attention to what’s hard to talk about.”

We are an explaining field. Philanthropy practitioners gravitate to left-brain thinking—the logical, sequential, analytical thinking that focuses on the parts of a system. There is nothing wrong with that! Foundations hire for technical expertise—whether it is about disparities in household income, racial and gender equity, global shifts in constitutional law, the cost-benefit ratio of solar energy, economic trends in a community, etc.—and why not? Grantees prefer program staff who understand and can add value to their work. But precise knowledge has its limits.

It isn’t the whole picture. The right brain focuses on synthesizing more random data and looks for whole pictures. This is where objects, images, stories and poems can advance new, generative thinking and identify different patterns. An object becomes the focus rather than our reactions to the other person’s personality, style of presenting or differing viewpoint. There is some evidence that images can interrupt how we see the norm and that may also be what helps make these third objects so powerful. For example, there have been studies that show evidence that images, along with education, can help “undo” subconscious racial and gender stereotypes and implicit bias. (See Appendix for research resources.)

Next time a program strategy needs input from people with different points of view, your collaborators seem stuck and silent, or a norm-challenging idea needs examination, try putting something in the middle to spark and sustain generative conversation as a reflective practice.

How Philanthropy Practitioners Let the Right Brain In

As chief executive officer of the Pride Foundation, Kris Hermanns had an annual report to put out right after the mass shooting at an Orlando nightclub. It had shocked everyone to the core, and it was not time to do business as usual. “I know myself well enough to know that if a decision isn’t coming to me easily, or if I have a sense of dread or uncertainty, I have to pay more attention to it,” she says. “It just didn’t feel right to write a Letter from Leadership.” Kris writes poetry as a personal reflective practice. For the annual report, she included “Inspired by a Belief,” where she explored her feelings about how cruel the world can be, how important it is to respond in a healthy way, and how reasonable it is that people feel hurt and pain. The poem **created space for a different conversation** with those who read and responded to the report.

Ted Lord, a senior partner at The Giving Practice, queried clients and colleagues about poetry that could be used to open up a dialogue that needed to happen but was stuck in some way. Within a few hours, he had a compendium of poems for Philanthropy’s Reflective Practices that were used to **help untangle classic, knotty moments in grantmaking**. Colleagues used poetry to shift conversations from the tactical to the strategic, amplify voices or perspectives of those not in the room, and reconnect a conversation back to its original intention. They took an outside object—in this case, poetry—and put it in the middle of a dialogue to shed new light and spark new thinking.

When Doug Stamm, the CEO of Meyer Memorial Trust, wanted trustees and investment managers to explore mission-related investments, he organized visits with MRI early adopters, speakers at board meetings, and board and staff attendance at conferences. While there was polite enthusiasm, he struggled to have a sustained discussion about the urgency and importance of MRIs to Meyer’s mission. Then **he decided on a new gambit**. At a roundtable of investment managers and trustees, Doug put next day’s *Oregonian* on the table with the headline “Dark Clouds Over Good Works of Meyer Memorial Trust.” Above the fold was a story about Meyer supporting both the Children’s Cancer Center and holding investments in tobacco. Following an immediate visceral reaction from the people in the room, Doug revealed the ruse—the story wasn’t real but a mock-up designed to get a more authentic, grounded conversation going. And it did.

To facilitate a board conversation about the values that their foundation believed in, Hanh Le, executive director of the Weissberg Foundation, decided that **“serious play” might help smart, opinionated individuals take a deeper dive** on the topic. She distributed the lyrics of Katy Perry’s “Rise” and invited board members to debate whether or not they represented the foundation’s values. By putting something outside their normal realm into the mix of dialogue, the board avoided old patterns of conversation, had fun, and started an exploration that helped advance the foundation’s mission.

Right-Brain Activity for a Left-Brain Field

Use images to invite groups to consider a dilemma or task. The Visual Explorer™ deck² has images that are very evocative and diverse from a race, gender and culture perspective. Make your own image deck from pictures in magazines. Or invite colleagues to bring an object or image that represents their thinking on the topic that will be discussed.



Visual Explorer™ image

Some suggestions from Chuck Palus at Center for Creative Leadership on using images:

- 1. Invite inquiry.** Ask participants to write down their own answers to a question tied to the issue at hand. It can be as broad as “What is our impasse?” or “What do you see as our primary task right now?”
- 2. Find an evocative image.** Give participants an opportunity to choose an image that is aligned with what they wrote. It might be an easy find, or it might simply be something that speaks out without explanation. Don’t overthink it!
- 3. Journal what you saw.** Now ask participants to write down what is in that image that made them choose it. Share the images and why you chose them in trios, make time for each other to say what they see in the image as well, and then discuss commonalities and differences.
- 4. Report back to the whole group** to discuss patterns for sensemaking purposes.

2. You can order the Visual Explorer™ deck from the Center for Creative Leadership.

Why This Project?

In philanthropy, you have two big jobs.

Your **first job** is to build deep knowledge about the *what* of the work that you are supporting. You stay current with new knowledge, find networks for ongoing learning, and grow your expertise.

Your **second job** is to put that expertise into play—the *how* of the work:

- How do you nurture generative thinking amid complicated group dynamics and power differentials?
- How do you keep learning alive among colleagues and partners?
- How do you strategize with others when there is no right answer to guide you?
- How do you contribute to the work of diversity, equity and inclusion in your organization or in a field?

Philanthropy's Reflective Practices can help you build what you bring to your second job.

Our goal is to learn and share the tools and skills used by practitioners in philanthropy to improve how they work and get to better outcomes in challenging situations.

PRP Briefs can help you start talking about the “how” of philanthropic work with colleagues, board members and partners. Each brief includes relevant examples, useful frameworks and an exercise that you can use with your team or partner to build what you bring to the work.

Want to Learn More?

Read our recent guide, browse posts from philanthropy colleagues or download the other briefs at www.reflectivepractices.org. Sign up to receive new material as it comes online. Want to build reflective practices inside your organization? Contact Jan Jaffe, project leader for Philanthropy's Reflective Practices (jan@reflectivepractices.org).